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# IMMIGRANT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES IN ITALIAN LITERATURE: THE BIRTH OF A NEW TEXT-TYPE

From the perspective of a mappemonde or a weather satellite, the Mediterranean area may seem like a single synoptic space. But when we come down to earth, we must come to terms with its complex geohistorical scenography. In this essay I will give a close look at a few autobiographies by recent immigrants to Italy, in the hopes of celebrating a literary genre that is just beginning to emerge and which finds its *raison d'être* in dramatizing a comparatist perspective and a transnational sense of belonging. Here, instead of the transcendent and cleansed perspective typical of the bird's-eye view, our texts will bring us to the situation on the ground and to a series of local sites, where cartographic totalities give way to a chorography of details.

I will begin by reworking a remark of Maurice Blanchot's. Let us assume that immigrant life-writing in Italy began at the moment when immigrant autobiographies became a question (Blanchot 21). In the 1980s and early 1990s in Italy — but also in the rest of Europe — a garrison-mentality emerged as a choral response to the so-called invading waves from Albania, Tunisia, Eritrea, Somalia, Morocco, and even from more distant countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, China, and the Philippines. One day, while waiting for the bus, you were startled into buying a billfold from a huge African "*vu comprà*" or street vendor, the next you fell out of bed and suddenly found yourself in a multiethnic society. This was the version which an alarmed news media and several political leaders helped to dramatize. In effect, an aging and thinning European population can no longer ignore these young strangers at the door, not only because in Italy alone they are now some two-million strong, but also because their labor and services are urgently needed. Of course, when compared to countries like Germany, England, France, Belgium, or Holland, Italy is one of the least multiethnic societies in the European Economic Community. In part, this is why — after the February, 1990, race raids in Florence and the earlier assassination of Jerry Essan Masslo at Villa Literno in 1989 — parliament has only recently come up with a progressive immigration bill, one that is more convincing on paper than in practice.

Immigrants like Salah Methnani, from Tunisi, and Pap Khouma, from Dakar, now have legal residence and work permits, although, like many of their coethnics, they first had to suffer the obliterating hardships of undocumented status. So now, besides being counted by immigration officers, they are also beginning to count socially and culturally. In the overheated climate that has plagued practically all public discussions of immigration, both Methnani and Khouma have agreed to recount their life in Italy, relying on the most nonliterary of genres in the democracy of letters. Minimum as well as maximum signs of the dawning of multiethnic society in Italy, these two texts successfully introduce us to new subject positions which are responsible for the most significant reinvention of Italian literary and cultural geography in recent years. In the appropriate language of the depoliticized nineties, they invite us to invest in a form of immigrant cultural capital accumulated by converting their proper names, until recently untallied, into marketable tales. More simply, they have exchanged their previously clandestine persons for the appreciable coin of naturalized discourse.

*Io, venditore di elefanti* (I, a peddler of elephants) by Pap Khouma is now in its fifth edition with Garzanti, the first dating back to 1990. Salah Methnani's *Immigrato* (Immigrant) was published by Theoria and also came out in 1990, evidently an *annus mirabilis* for immigrant autobiographical narration in Italy. Methnani's is now in its third edition. It is this new kind of accountability, nothing less than a *coup de nom*, that has lead to the instauration of a new literary text-type, even if both autobiographies have been midwifed by friendly editors. And I should add, as a sign of their powerless status, that there is no way of knowing from the texts themselves just how "friendly" the editing was. In both texts the paternal hand is invisible. To be sure, it is a common rule with immigrant autobiographies that some mentor or well-intentioned public figure add an authenticating preface or some other prestige-lending gloss. Oreste Pivetti, head of the book review section for *L'Unità*, is officially designated editor of Pap Khouma's autobiography and has added a brief introduction denouncing the plight of immigrants in Italy. The other text, *Immigrato*, actually bears the names of two authors, and on the inside of the front cover we read, "Assembled and transcribed with a limpid and direct style by Mario Fortunato." This stylistic make-over was probably justified because the text is "the first story about the world of the immigrants seen from within." Editing is the price exotic subalterns often pay for the privilege of being first. For us, this complicates rather than simplifies the text's tale.

But what do these flashes of immigrant life-writing have to do with the Mediterranean as a geohistorical totality or Braudel's concept of immobile history? Civilizations are, above all, spaces, he reminds us in his vast study of the area which I alluded to at the outset (2.818). And given their vegetal-like growth, immigrant testimony may truly seem dust in our eyes. On the other hand, Braudel also concedes, "Civilizations are the most complex, the most contradictory characters of the Mediterranean" (2. 817). It is not clear, in fact, just what status should be assigned to Braudel's historical approach: is it nomothetic, and thus ruled by universal concepts like those governing the natural sciences, or is it idiographic, a method based on details aspiring, at best, to a *mathesis singularis* and an openly imaginative form of historical surmise. Besides that of civilizations, Braudel also notices other dimensions of agency, including those minimum traces that seem as insignificant in their random flights as they are untraceable. Thus he writes, "All climbs, all transfers, are permitted to man. Nothing can stop him, he and the goods — whether material or spiritual — that he carries with him when he is alone and acts in his own name" (2. 814). In addition, Braudel's study of the Mediterranean is stocked with what read like one- or two-sentence monographs that evoke the trajectory of a name.

When we try to gauge the substance of his geohistorical cartographies, it seems he plunges us into a physics of his metier, if not ultimately converting history itself into a physiosemiotic process. Let us look at one of the relevant passages defining what to him the Mediterranean civilizations are: "*Like dunes, firmly clinging to the secret roughness of the soil: their grains of sand come and go, take flight, and pile up at the wind's pleasure, but, an immobile sum of endless movement, the dune remains in its place*" (2. 800, my emphasis). Having spent the summer on the Lido of Venice's dunes, I wonder whether this heuristic metaphor actually suggests that civilizations are stable. On the contrary, as Braudel seems to admit, they are remarkably mobile, errant, and incessantly disturbed by winds and rain and what not. In truth, synthesis history is no more capable of predicting the trajectory of a Moroccan rug peddler along the Lido's beaches than meteorology — once associated with ancient Greek psychological doctrine — is of predicting whether it will rain on a particular afternoon. Well then, at any given moment, where should we locate the Mediterranean's spatial "here" if, as Braudel notes, civilizations are "victims of absurd 'Brownian' motions in their slightest details" (2. 800).

For an answer, let's turn our attention to details and the idiographic format which two young immigrant peddlers, Salah Methnani and Pap Khouma, used to recount their adventures up and down the Italian boot. Before doing so, we should take to heart Pedrag Matvejevic's reminder in his Mediterranean vademecum, "The Mediterranean and discourse about the Mediterranean are inseparable from each other" (20), as well as Braudel's collateral observation that the Mediterranean is both a material space and a space of discourse (1. 128). It is a sign of immigrant autobiography's critical role in any reconsideration of today's Mediterranean world that, generically, these texts employ a topological hermeneutic in which spatiality functions as the symbolic conduit between the plotting of identity-construction and Italian realities. In effect, we can speak of a constructive homology between immigrant autobiographical practice and the Braudelian attempt to read civilizations as spaces. This sensitivity to spatiality also conditions the actual writing process in Methnani's and Khouma's texts, where syntax becomes an exercise in site analysis, with the self now embedded in the site. "I write to travel across myself," says Henri Michaux, whom George Perec quotes (15) to help reinforce a topological sense of writing that throws light on immigrant autobiographical discourse. It is in *Espèces d'espaces* that Perec draws out his metaphor of writing as a form of anthropological field-work: "I write: I inhabit my sheet of paper, I invest it, I cross it; I create typographic *blanks, spaces* (leaps of sense: discontinuities, passages, transitions)" (17).

In order to underscore the cartographic vocation of immigrant autobiographies, I will call them map biographies, with Hugh Brody's work on the Beaver Indians of northern British Columbia in mind (Brody 146-77). Methnani's text, for example, is segmented into ten chapters, with the following titles: "At Tunisi," "Mazara del Vallo," "Palermo," "Naples," "Rome," "Florence," "Padua," "Turin," "Milan," and finally "At Kairouan." Thus we have a series of names, all the names of cities, and these imply a trajectory leading from Tunisia to Italy and then back to Tunisia. In short, a circle, although the last chapter ends with Methnani on his way back to Rome, where, he adds casually, he has finally found a steady job, an apartment, and residence and work permits. In short, after all his wandering, he drops the news that he has made it. The year is presumably 1987, after the first law legalizing undocumented immigrants was passed. So, by the end of his autobiography Methnani also puts an end to his roaming, except for summer vacations with his father in Kairouan. More than a sequence of

moves, the chapters of this nomadic, city-hopping text indicate a series of removes, since each new point leads him further from home along a South/North axis. That is, from a hot climate to a cold one, where temperature also implies a different kind of thermometer. Here is the narrator:

Just off the train, I feel a terrible cold.... My hands swell and my nose begins to drip. There's nobody around. It's Sunday afternoon and, I tell myself, the immigrants will be inside, watching television. The city is beautiful, a little ghostly. The people walk in a hurry. Nobody looks at you in the face.... I move without knowing where to go. I only manage to think, 'Move it, otherwise you'll freeze to death.' (86)

This scene of arrival, which combines cityscape and soulscape in a single scan, nicely suggests the topological engagement of immigrant autobiography and its tendency to see the protagonist ecologically, as a self in a field. As George Perec says in *Espèces d'espaces*, "To live is to pass from one space to the next, trying not to get hurt too badly" (12). Indeed, immigrant selves are more often an effect than a producer of the positions they take. And although Methnani's narrator notes that it is Sunday, the passing of time — chronological notation — is not a significant concern in either of the autobiographies. They rarely mark days or months or years. Instead, time for them is spatialized. It is measured as a jumble of moves from one city to the next, in confirmation of Pierre Bourdieu's view of life-writing. Rather than describing a linear chronology, "[b]iographical events may be properly defined as so many locations and moves (*placements et déplacements*) in social space..." (Bourdieu and Wacquant 208). Attention to the toposophical maneuvers of immigrant autobiography provides the reader with direct access to the anthropological truth of Methnani's and Khouma's narratives.

Both of their autobiographical trajectories are bumpy rides across a discontinuous social surface. Reflecting the traumatized structure of immigrant life, these texts quickly break up into a haphazard series of discrete episodes ranging anywhere from a police shakedown, an incident of racial stereotyping, a scene of sexual stalking, to a selling raid along the beaches of Rimini, a liquor-inspired "*je accuse*" delivered in a crowded city bus, or an evening meal of mortadella and cheese in a charity soup kitchen. The point is, such immigrant (or *vu comprà*) scripts depend much more on the agency of the sites than on the interpretive surveillance of the narrator for

the sites' semiotic allusiveness. Both Methnani and Khouma recount their stories in the present tense, which means they wish to dramatize sites and their position in them to the utmost. This basically chorographic habit stimulates an even greater sense in the reader of following a developing story, as television commentators call breaking news. In effect, no matter how repetitive, episodes like those mentioned above rarely show their stitches, in part because the stringing together of sites remains consistently undertheorized.

Our immigrant narrators are nervous and above all in a hurry. Although they judge, they have little time for speculation. The work of suturing and implication greatly depends on our own cultural competence and alertness to multiethnic visibilities. In fact, Methnani's and Khouma's narrators show little desire to impose a totalizing code that would lead up to and guarantee closure. Narrative frames seem like so many unhinged spaces because practically all of them mark a spatial shift in the plot. So wherever they go, our undocumented immigrants are always starting over again. This focus on the singularity of sites also suggests that the *mise-en-intrigue* of the self in this text type is determined by a spontaneous dialectic. The informal plot reflects the informal economy they are bound to. No master code tries to explain away the semiotic excesses of the sites themselves. As the etymon implies, immigrant encounters (the Latin, *in plus contra*) are simultaneously a moving towards and a moving against. Another effect of this basically phatic or ostensive approach to emplotment is that immigrant life is presented as a sum rather than a summing up of such encounters. In short, autobiographical argument is topological not linear, and serial not progressive.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that these autobiographies read like receptacle books or anatomies, in which the function of plot is chiefly to collect the shock events which their peddling protagonists register and try to absorb as they move along. Not only is the immigrant autobiographical protagonist seen as a self in a field, 'but even the genre asks to be read as a field text. As Methnani's and Khouma's protagonists pass from city to city, they also pass from site to site, presenting us with their chorographic savvy. Such testimony, which results from the protagonist's relentless errancy, is an important poetic feature of this text type. Like Methnani, Pap Khouma also structures his narrative topologically. Starting out in Dakar, his protagonist travels to Abidjan, then by plane to Rome and on to Riccione by train. Next he goes to Paris, tries to enter Germany, and after being stopped,

returns to Paris and then back to Italy and an endless round of cities, wherever he might find a good market for peddling his merchandise. In a typical passage he recounts, "From now on we move by train towards Lodi, Casalpusterlengo, Genoa, Cremona, Crema" (81), and earlier, "The boys are once again in the bars, the markets, in the towns around Cesena and even further, beyond Forli, which we avoid because word of a very mean police force has reached us" (75-6).

I hope it is clear by now that such networks of names signify not only the tracing of a mental map but also the evocation of a sort of chorographic practice which results in the accumulation of immigrant capital or, as I mentioned above, place-wisdom. "Geography," Giorgio Mangani notes, "is in reality a problem of names, of geographic etymologies, of relations between names and places" (73). So it is with immigrant autobiographies. Names become sites through spatial reconnoitering. Thus, when Khouma and his friends enter a new city, they treat it like a biotope. In the following passage he recounts his entrance into Milan and the process of accumulating immigrant *savoir-faire*:

The first day is dedicated to exploration. We can't stop peddling, we need money, but we want to get to know the city, discover the best places, maybe find another hotel, far from the carabinieri and police. Mordiarra and I venture towards Corso Venezia and Corso Buenos Aires. Soon we'll get to know the names of the streets. For the moment we move the way the wind blows, wherever we are led by our vendor's noses trained to avoid dangers and spot easy customers. We count on direct experience and the not always reliable advice of friends... (86)

It is this sense of the city as site — and movement through it as an exercise in site analysis — that justifies our labeling immigrant autobiography a field text and, given the poetics of information that works to swell these nomadic journeys with addresses and lists of all kinds, also a map biography. The immigrant self in Khouma's and Methnani's narratives can never afford to forget his position, where he stands. In other words, point of view is never unspecified but is quite literally a view taken from a point (Bourdieu and Wacquant 74). Thus, when applied to immigrant autobiographical narration, the effort to read civilizations spatially inevitably becomes a cartographic affair. Here is Methnani's protagonist sizing up Rome:

Little by little, I have learned to recognize the meeting places according to ethnic groups and origins. Rome has an alternative map to the one you find in the Yellow Pages. For example, do you want to know where the Libyans meet? Simple, in a bar in via Gioberti, a corner bar. Instead, the Senegalese prefer to gather in the gardens of Colle Oppio, and the Philippines in piazza Risorgimento, next to the tram stop. For all Arabs, one calling point is represented by the Islamic Center in piazza Ungheria, very crowded especially on Fridays. While we Tunisians move among the bars of piazza Esedra and those of piazza dei Cinquecento. It is an authentic, second-level topography, this, a sort of underground circuit in the light of day, with its own rules and its own well-defined boundaries. (57)

Methnani's "little by little" implies a great deal. But basically, his main task is to accumulate immigrant capital, knowledge that he needs in order to eat, sleep, meet, and sell. So he makes it a point to discover the ethnic enclaves and intersections where he might pick up crucial information on the parallel world — of "second-level topography" — that appears on no official map of Rome. By tracing this "underground circuit [with] its own well-defined boundaries," Methnani's and Khouma's autobiographies provide precious maps of multiethnic Italy, a cultural geography largely unknown to, or simply ignored by, those who were born and raised there. Again, the more the autobiographical route is packed with frames of encounter and collision, the more extensive are the lists of places, catalogues of goods, and directories of names making up the narrator's cultural capital. In short, instead of metaphor immigrant autobiographical narration prizes information. Its literary pretensions are based on a poetics of numbers: street numbers, phone numbers, hotel numbers, tram numbers, and, above all, the sums that money makes. Thus, numbers too are taught to dance.

While Methnani's and Khouma's texts present themselves as nonliterary and all too literal, still there is a fabula element that taints them with an allegorical pathos reminiscent of that great Western journey, the pilgrimage. Before setting foot in Italy, Pap Khouma, for example, dreams of "wonderful cities" and "nice things" (19). "I want to leave [Senegal] in order to come back rich. I fantasize about my freedom" (24), he says. And again, "I've come to Italy to change even my clothes and my shoes" (28). It is from an airplane window that he first spots the shores of "the country of the *tubab* [whites], which still seems the country of happiness" (25). The fabula moment of expectation is even stronger in Methnani who already as a small

child begins to think of Italy as “a happy, enchanted land” (10). This first thought goes back to a very special occasion when his father taught him to count up to ten in Italian: “Uno, due, tre, quattro, cinque...” (10). This mastery is associated in his mind with his father’s sermon to him on life, destiny, and the importance of being a man. Later, whenever he wants to show off his strength and superiority to a classmate, “he would begin to repeat that magical abracadabra: ‘Uno, due, tre, quattro, cinque...’, regularly stumbling on that fatal ‘diaci’” (10-1) which his father could not get him to pronounce right.

More importantly, Italy represents for Methnani’s narrator “the myth of the West” (12) where one can find work, strike it rich, and be free. Both he and Pap Khouma present themselves as tyros involved in a rite of passage. Thus, before departing for Mazaro del Vallo in Sicily, he asks himself, “Am I leaving as a North African emigrant or as an ordinary fellow who wants to know the world?” (14). Alerted to the presence of abstract ideals, we naturally think of the protagonist’s topological journey as a dialectic between the space of his experience and his initial horizon of expectations. “I’m tired, but my eyes are wide open to discover everything” (29), Khouma’s tyro says. The projective moment of the incipit in immigrant autobiographies cannot but generate a latent tension as the narrative journey begins to explore the consequences of a young twenty-two-year-old’s separation from home and his or her contact with a new culture. Separation introduces a comparatist perspective into the text, and this stereoscopic work typically entertains frames concerning food, religion, customs, climate, language, and values.

But most contact frames concern work, and to the extent that these are negative, it becomes natural for the narrator to contrast host and home cultures, with the latter becoming increasingly idealized. The worse things get, the more the immigrant protagonist starts thinking about returning home, although such thoughts are often left covert. After the police have hauled them into headquarters and confiscated their goods for the umpteenth time, Pap Khouma and his friends ask themselves, “Where are we going? What have we done wrong? We have only tried to sell in order to make a living” (63). As Khouma says at one point, “If I had a little money, I’d return to Senegal” (81). As fatigue and illness set in and anxiety and deprivation grow, Methnani, Khouma, and their friends of the moment inevitably find themselves thinking about what they left behind. Memory, in particular the recollection of faces and places back home, becomes a significant narrative

frame, not so much in terms of frequency as of intensity: “Dakar grows in my dream, as I become homesick, until it ascends to paradise” (74), Khouma’s narrator says, adding:

We all look like survivors. ‘Do you remember...’ becomes the common refrain on everybody’s lips. Each of us summons up a picture of his family in which mother is preeminent (74).

True to the structure of rites of passage, Khouma’s and Methnani’s young novices are haunted by solitude, a form of sufferance that accompanies their coming to manhood in Italy. For Khouma, even getting off the plane in Rome is like escaping shipwreck, but more seriously, the travels of both of our protagonists can be read as a journey of spiritual descent. Both of them explore the depths of what it means to be an undocumented immigrant. Always on the run, stripped of elementary rights, forced to take dead-end jobs, accustomed to sleeping in trains and cars, often going without a decent meal, harassed by the police day in and day out, lacking sufficient clothing or any safety net to cover illness, these nomadic selves live “minimalist lives” (Mahler 130). For the reader, and often for the autobiographical narrator as well, the incipit stands as a steady point of reference for calibrating the code of descent. More of a loner and lacking the group solidarity that exists among the Senegalese, Methnani is more exposed to immigrant nothingness. Thus, during the Christmas holidays in Milan, he finds himself alone and without a place to go:

It’s funny, in Tunisia when I thought about what the West was like, I saw it just like this: sparkling shop windows, red carpeting along the more fashionable streets, and a thick, but muffled, hubbub of passers-by absorbed in buying smart gifts. Only that, in this fantasy, me and my friends were part of the game.... (111)

Freedom now means drifting, while his “mythic image...of the marvelous West” (112) remains behind glass. “Yet, I also tell myself, perhaps it’s an image that will help me to survive” (112). Once introduced, such ideal images function randomly. Always present in the back of the narrator’s mind, they involuntarily spring forward to illumine the abyss between dream and reality. On his way to Lambrate from the city center, Methnani’s downtrodden protagonist notes, “the rich West changes suddenly into a gloomy and desolate territory. It is no longer the West” (116). Back in the

camper where he has found a place to stay, and surrounded by fog and garbage, it seems to him like "the end of the world" (114).

But neither incipit nor closure can expiate the paratactic series of encounters that compose the autobiographical plot. No ideological moment can stand in for the sites themselves. When Pap Khouma first arrives at Riccione and goes looking for the cousin of a friend from Abidjan, he learns that he is out working "at Porto San Giorgio, Porto Recanati, Civitanova Marche, Numana" (29). Once he too is broken into the peddling trade, the addition of the verb "working" will seem superfluous. Often in Khouma we are given only the string: "Genoa, Florence, Siena, Lucca, Perugia" (136). Such toponymic cataloguing serves to referentialize his peddling activities and, in the words of Michel de Certeau, "these names articulate a sentence that his steps compose without his knowing it" (104). The steps are those of an undocumented Senegalese peddler. The sentence unconditionally has to do with his name. The sense of his encounters is both objectified in the sites themselves and incarnated in his own body. It is hard not to agree with Michel Serres when he notes in his book *Rome*, "A series of names is itself worth many theories" (237).

Selling, then, is easily the dominant verbal rhythm in Khouma's and Methnani's autobiographies. In them the plot journey — the rite of passage — is itself transmuted into an economic trajectory. Money means success and lack of it, failure. For our "*vu comprà*" protagonists places are valued above all as selling points. Sites, in other words, are less monumental spaces than they are intersections of exchange, and are chosen according to the volume of traffic they represent. Markets, piazzas, busy street corners, train stations, subway networks, beaches, and fairs all become favorite opportunity structures. The more movement there is, the better, which means the best sites are also the most kinesthetic. It is the search for such strategic points that stirs competition and compels these undocumented workers to keep moving, from one peddling raid to the next, until their lives become a roller coaster ride in Italy's informal economy. Blocked into this distinct labor market, they go with the flow. As indeterminate trajectories within Braudel's spatialized civilization, they are indeed "victims of absurd 'Brownian' motions in their slightest details."

It was in 1858 that Robert Brown, the Scott botanist, discovered "the peculiar random movement exhibited by microscopic particles...when suspended in liquids or gases..." the randomness being "caused by the impact of the molecules of fluid surrounding the particle" (*Webster's Third Inter-*

*national Dictionary*). Braudel's use of physics to explain civilizations as spaces is a remarkable historiographic expedient. Thirteen years before Brownian motion was discovered, Michael Faraday had already introduced the term magnetic field to explain the phenomenon of lines of force in an electrically roused space. When James Maxwell converted Faraday's ideas into mathematical formula, the common-sense view of reality was well on its way to being dematerialized. In the discipline of sociology Pierre Bourdieu has recently used a similar concept of dynamic space to underscore the relations between an individual's *habitus* (or set of dispositions) and various kinds of fields. And, directly bearing on immigrant autobiographical narration, he relies on field to describe the life-story as a spatial trajectory. This concept also represents his attempt to combine structure and history, conservation and change, macro- and micro-analysis (Bourdieu and Wacquant 262).

Stressing the importance of physiosemiosis (or biocultural interaction) for the human sciences, Michel Serres notes, "[T]hat is what the meaning of history comes to: scenes. Scenes, and thus sites, from which to see representations" (23). For Serres, starting from scenes means getting history to reclaim its ichnographic origins. That is, history must acknowledge its kinship with the ancient divinatory science of reading traces. As Paul Ricoeur has noted, in his study of the Mediterranean world "Braudel proceeds analytically, by separating planes [his three temporal levels], leaving to the interferences that occur between them the task of producing an implicit image of the whole. In this way a virtual quasi-plot is obtained, which itself is split into several subplots, and these, although explicit, remain partial and in this sense abstract" (215). In the mid-seventies the Italian school of microhistory polemically set out to make history's marginal subplots its central concern, and in doing so, developed a historiography of scenes often based on insignificant proper names. Relying on a paradigm of traces theorized in his book *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, Carlo Ginzburg tracked names like Menocchio the miller to open up a new investigative mode of social history equipped to delve into any cultural zone the name's trajectory might seem to cross: ethnography, folklore, myth, belief systems, geography, philosophy, economics, and so forth (Ginzburg and Ponti 181-90).

The point is, for our microhistorians the research experience itself, with all its fragments, gaps, and working hypotheses, is what their narratives tend to foreground. Instead of predisposed totalities, they recount

Salah Methnani's informal "second-level topography." In an important essay on microhistory, Ginzburg recently suggested an affinity between his own elected scale of analysis and the cinematic technique of the close-up (526). Like Michelangelo Antonioni's photographer in *Blow Up*, he enlarges what appear to be insignificant details and finds himself teasing out clues that form an even more astonishing story. So the microhistorian changes more than the scale of representation. A switch in focus introduces a completely different reality. Mappemondes and topographic maps represent two opposing scales of cartographic representation. In other words, decisions about scale are important because they raise a fundamental question: what reality will be represented (Revel 19). When Mandelbrot raised the problem of measuring the coast of Bretagne in his book *Les objets fractals*, he realized that at an extremely small scale, the very concept of coast ceases to pertain to geography (Lepetit 86). Likewise, when Pap Khouma collapses from an ulcer in his bathroom and lays there all night, too weak to move, he plays with scale: "I study the tiles of the bathroom, the cracks, the geographies of the world, the seas, the craters of the moon, our mountains. I dream. I awake. I doze off" (135). When Salah Methnani arrives in Turin, he buys a map of the city, studies it, and then tears it up, preferring to rely on his own immigrant know-how to access the network of sites and sources of his multiethnic world (102).

What microhistory teaches us about the paradigm of detection, the issue of scale, and the narrative value of a name's trajectory is closer in spirit to Braudel's sand-dune metaphor of the Mediterranean than Braudel's own confession of it, especially if that dune's Brownian motion is applied to immigrant life-writing. Ultimately, neither a graph nor the geographer's eye is sufficient to capture the sense of Methnani's and Khouma's trajectories of selling. Legally invisible, economically without substance, and lacking a place of their own, they are forced to live according to their wits, that is tactically. As de Certeau has pointed out, "The space of the tactic is the space of the other" (37). Undocumented immigrants live within this space because they have no position of withdrawal, self-collection or foresight. They sell on the run, in isolated actions, exploiting the opportunities that come their way (de Certeau 35-37). Pap Khouma and his friends live by false names: "[T]his is the rule. We are still clandestine, still live in the shadows.... We never say who we are, where we're going, what we're doing" (116). And when asked where they live? "We clandestines always live at Central Station" (118). Towards the end of *Immigrato*, Methnani's pro-

tagonist goes for a walk in Khouma's Central Station in Milan and there, next to one of the escalators, sees a group of North Africans: "They seem like a caravan of nomads gathered around a palm tree — there they stand, idling, waiting to leave for nowhere" (111). At the close of *Immigrato*, the narrator muses, "I wondered where they ended up, all those people whom I took note of" (126).

Yet, with respect to the Mediterranean's Brownian motion, Braudel is certainly right. There may be a lot of movement, but everything remains the same. As Methnani says of the caravan of North Africans at Milan's Central Station, "It's the usual landscape" (111). On any given day, you can go down to the train station of most major Italian cities and find the usual group of "*extracommunitari*" gathered out front. For members of the *Annales* school, such regularities allow the historian to make nomothetic pronouncements. As for economic exchange, Pap Khouma at one point of his story sizes up his situation as follows: "After a year in Italy I find myself with the same amount of money and squeezed dry with exhaustion" (105). This, too, is a rather redundant remark. On one of those rare occasions in which Khouma provides us with a date, it is to underscore this very point: "It's April 21 and I'm back to zero" (94). If for immigrant peddlers Italy is a space of numbers, for Italian citizens the immigrants in turn are reduced to a problem of numbers.

Of course, the real issue is another. If it were not so, we would have missed not only the gist of the microhistorian's example but also the import of immigrant autobiographical testimony. This observation of Methani's now seems crucial: "Everyday the names of persons are so many, so alike, that they dissolve in a single wave without a center" (108). In other words, the number of immigrants in Milan's Central Station may always be consistent, but the people behind the dissolving names are invariably different. Italy's Pap Khoumas may forever have a hole in their pockets, but that says nothing about what went in and then out of them on any given day. Nor can we put aside Philippe Lejeune's observation that the very genre of autobiography hinges on the "*petite pragmatique du nom réel*" (Lejeune 25). And when this proper name belongs to an immigrant whose narrative recounts the process of passing from an invisible, undocumented status to one of legalized visibility, then indeed we are witnesses to a clever trick — as if Methnani's dissolving names suddenly sprang up out of the blue. But what, or should I say where, is the point of this trick? If we return once again to

Braudel's sand dune metaphor, it is the trajectories of the proper names that instill it with motion. For what is a sand dune without the sand?

While there may be repetition or a statistical law at work here, the space of numbers must not be confused with the idiographic contexts woven by immigrant autobiographical narration. These are the result of a poetics of information which immigrant autobiographies invent to convert both selling and narrative telling into immigrant capital: namely, all those resources — whether cultural, social, linguistic, symbolic, legal, or economic (Calhoun, LiPuma, Postone) — which serve to make a name for oneself in Italy. As I mentioned earlier, work is by far the dominant narrative frame of the immigrant autobiographical fabula. The abstract space of numbers or the function of money pervades the plot through the defining game of counting, recounting, and finally *recounting* (with the accent on the second syllable). At work in this participial progression is a process of conversion that Serge Moscovici, following in the wake of Georg Simmel, sees operating in all monetary cultures, in which value is simultaneously assigned to a thing and to the fluid movement of its price (367-426). In fact, money is "a material ideogram that symbolizes in the external world the most diverse stirrings of our internal world" (Moscovici 375).

Perhaps the most intimate and yet common script of such ideogrammatic transactions is shopping, which inspired a recent pop artist to note, "I shop therefore I am." Is there a more reassuring way of demonstrating the symbolic power of money? Down and out in Paris, Pap Khouma's narrator recounts:

As our trio moves along Paris's beautiful streets, I continue to glance at the windows. But I don't see clothes and shoes. I only see three black individuals wrapped in their rags, wearing tired and embittered faces.  
(52)

It comes as no surprise that Methnani has a similar experience, only this time in Turin: "Casually, as I walk, I look at myself in the window of a clothing store. I am poorly dressed. I'm dirty. I'm ashamed" (102). Such scenes, of course, were already the stock-in-trade of turn-of-the-century urban naturalism. In both Methnani and Khouma the shopwindow is used to reflect a larger truth about the normative function of money: namely, that of distancing the object of desire — in this case, much needed clothes — by exhibiting and attaching a price tag to it; and that of anchoring this desire in a flesh and blood human being. As Moscovici argues, money has the

function of social reification (380). It gives an abstract value to our desires, enabling us to placate or even arouse them further, depending on how rich or how poor we are.

Often penniless in a city of shop windows, Salah Methnani adopts the one defense he can stomach, that of cultivating an attitude of complete indifference to the world (85, 105). He describes the effects of such a stance on those of his coethnics who, out of desperation, get involved in selling drugs, but he also counts the cost on himself. As he tells, "Little by little, persons and places become one-dimensional transparencies: mere surfaces which you slide over" (51). At times, as he is walking along, he even feels he is floating, like a balloon. Other acquaintances of his go to the opposite extreme by selling themselves for money. Microhistories of prostitution among North African males and females abound in these autobiographies, but on one occasion Pap Khouma meets three young Senegalese women who explain the law of exchangeability that governs their lives. As they tell him, "We sell everything: elephants, necklaces, bracelets, our dignity, our work, our youth, our dreams" (37). This merging of goods and persons adds further pathos to a remark that Khouma's narrator makes in a later chapter: "My Africa is for sale" (61).

These two immigrant autobiographies invest heavily in the signifying economy that converts selling into telling. Both activities, representing story and discourse, spring from a single etymon, the Latin *com-putare*. From it come the French *compter* (later, *conter*), and, of course, the English *to count*. From the same Latin root we also have *conte*, French for story, and *racconto*, its Italian equivalent. In English we have the verb *to recount*, the Latin *raccontare* meaning "to enumerate by narrating and describing" (Pianigiani). As I already suggested, there is in Khouma and Methnani a process of conversion by which selling and learning how to live by selling become the very subject of immigrant autobiographical narration. Throughout *Immigrato*, for example, the protagonist repeatedly finds himself trying to count up to ten in Italian, and this for several reasons: at times to block out his overwhelming sense of despair and misery, at other times to recite a script his father taught him that celebrates linguistic, economic, and cultural mastery. Khouma, too, presents the activity of counting as the very spring of his autobiographical plot. Again and again, we listen to his protagonist say such things as, "I count and recount, but only a hundred francs are left in my pocket: 'What will I do after I've spent these hundred francs too?'" (52).

This last remark, with its sense of living out a daily emergency, suggests what kind of semiotic investment our text-type specializes in. In the effort to accumulate immigrant capital, counting means many things. For example, in discussing a typical figure in the Senegalese or any ethnic enclave for that matter, Khouma says, "Black Paul counted a lot in the beginning. Then everybody learned how to get by on their own account and Black Paul no longer frightened anybody" (35). When discussing the frequent immigrant mandate to generate surplus income in order to help out the family back home, Khouma cites a letter from his father which is eloquent in this respect:

They wrote back reminding me how lucky we were to have had the chance to leave Africa and come to Europe: "Here life is becoming more and more difficult. We count on you, on your help. We can't ask you the impossible, but try anyway to do something for us. We always remember you in our prayers." (90)

It is because their families count on them that the literal business of adding up the day's earnings becomes so urgent and so full of pathos.

As Khouma tells, "I see that the others put their daily earnings away, a nice little pile each day. They count their money and recount it, they nurse it with their eyes, breaking out in big smiles" (33).

A similar passage in Methnani suggests how precious this script is at the close of a day in the life of an immigrant. The Christmas holidays are just over and Methnani's protagonist goes with his Senegalese friend Bobo to a free-lunch kitchen in via Maroncelli, Milan. While eating, he glances around the room and describes what he sees. Then he fixes on this scene: "One fellow is examining the banknotes he has in his pockets. He takes them out one by one, puts one on top of the other neatly unfolded, and counts them. His hands move in slow motion, hieratically" (117). What moves here is not only the young man's priestly hands, but also the narrator's liturgical description of them — as if the two of them were performing the action together. Perhaps, in the back of our minds, we also recall the words, "*Hoc est enim corpus meum.*" The narrative economy of conversion warrants it. At any rate, the scene's almost reverential tone marks it as the quintessential immigrant script.

After all, it is by counting and recounting that immigrant capital accumulates, until it finally flows over into life-writing. Specifically, linguistic capital is the key to this cultural form of counting by accounting for oneself

narratively. Both autobiographies foreground their protagonists' struggles to learn Italian, and success in selling and in dealing with the police depends directly on their proficiency in it. But certainly the crowning trick for an immigrant trying to make it in the emporium-world of the West is that by which money is made over into cultural capital. Khouma closes his autobiography proverbially, by noting, "This is the life of a Senegalese, the life I have known for what seems a very long time, but at bottom fortunate because, as we say in my country, if you can recount a thing, it means that it has brought you good luck" (143). At a very early stage in his narrative, Methnani begins to keep a diary which helps him fight off loneliness, despair, and loss of identity. It also functions as a form of memory and becomes a storage place for the names of all those he has met and wants to remember. In effect, his poetic use of lists allows him to escape from succumbing to the law of social reification that money enforces. But his point is even broader, for it is given to his diary to protect the names he collects from being washed away in the river of statistics:

As the days pass, I find myself opening my notebook more and more often. Many pages are filled with events, names, dates.... I even feel a sense of tenderness towards it: its thin yellow cover is all spotted, and the corners of many of its pages are curled and damp. (116)

It is near the end of his narrative, and at the very end of his diary, that he decides to add one last word in Italian, *ciao*, which seals his own as yet private success in counting and recounting. As he muses, "Sometimes I feel like a kind of collector of others' stories" (121). For the seemingly countless names he catalogues in his diary mark an acquired disposition to trace the trajectory of immigrant names. When he first decides to begin a diary, he motivates his choice as follows:

The last couple of days I have begun to keep a sort of diary in which I jot down the most banal events, the most insignificant details.... At least in this way, I tell myself, time, people, deeds will not entirely pass away without significance. In a few months from now, I'll be able to open my diary, and I'll be able to ask of a page, "Do you remember that time..." Or, "What's the name of that girl from Mazara?" My notebook, in silence, will answer, indicating their names, their profiles, and finally their bodies. (51)

To be sure, this is essentially a gesture in favor of microhistory, in which immigrant autobiography presents its own cultural capital as a book of names — strange-sounding immigrant names. And, as Methnani and Khouma show, these names in reality represent so many stories, just like the two I have tried to present here.

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## EMIGRATION AND ITALIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

Writing about Italians in America, the anti-fascist émigré Massimo Salvadori stated: "In Italy they had never been Italians, but in America they became Italian nationalists, and to that degree they were fascists."<sup>1</sup> Salvadori's statement might be misleading.

There is no question that the Fascist regime sought to arouse and reinforce sentiments of *Italianità* among Italians abroad. Fascist propaganda concentrated on themes and values designed to create a feeling of solidarity between Italy and émigré Italians. However, Italians who came to America had become passionately nationalist long before Mussolini started his campaign of rebuilding national pride. It is important, therefore, to revisit the process of Italian National Identity Building abroad among immigrants.

It is an accepted view that emigrants generally left Italy with little or no sense of national identity. Rather, family links and village or regional loyalties constituted the essential ingredients of self-identification. Once they came abroad, various factors played a role in shaping the profound transformation of their identity as a national group. The most important forces that helped to mold their nationalism were congenital to the causes of Italian emigration and how Italian emigration was perceived both by the majority of the Italian political establishment and by the American cultural establishment. Indeed, because the causes of Italian emigration were somewhat different from those of other nationalities who came to this country, we should assume that the expectations and behavior of Italian immigrants were somewhat different from those of other national immigrant groups.

For one thing, most Italian emigrants left not because of religious persecution or political oppression but for economic reasons. Most Italian emigrants were attracted to America by wage differences rather than desire to escape an oppressive government or long-term goals of permanent emigration. Popular culture reflects this attitude. Most importantly, autobiographies and letters by emigrants are very relevant in this regard. A popular refrain in Southern Italy stated that one could make more money in one day in N.Y. than in one week in Southern Italy. In his autobiography, *La scoperta dell'America*, Carmine Biagio Iannace writes: